

# Nurses, hospital reach agreement

Hospitals- Watsonville Hospital

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WATSONVILLE — The Watsonville Community Hospital nurses' strike appears to be over.

At 11 a.m. today, the 170 nurses who virtually shut down the hospital by walking out early Saturday morning are expected to ratify a new contract, hammered out after three hours of secret and intense negotiations Wednesday afternoon.

"I'm recommending this agreement and I think we're going to ratify," California Nurses Association's Willard Hatch said Wednesday night. "I've learned never to speak for nurses, but I'd bet on it."

"I'm so relieved, I'm ecstatic," said Pat Hargadon, a veteran of more than 12 years at the hospital who was on the nurses' negotiating

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committee. Hargadon had spent the entire day on a picket line outside the hospital.

With the help of Teamsters union negotiators Sergio Lopez and Leon Ellis, Hatch and the hospital's chief

executive officer, Paul Estess, were able to reach a compromise in a three-hour bartering session lasting from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday.

During the strike, the hospital has been unable to treat seriously ill or injured people. By Wednesday morning, there were just 16 patients in hospital beds. Other area hospitals have taken up the slack.

The proposed agreement will actually give nurses an even greater wage increase than they had been asking for — 18 percent over three years, as opposed to 16 percent. Full-time nurses now take home between \$30,000 and \$37,000 annually.

Estess was able to offer the extra money after Hatch agreed to

**Please see NURSES — A12**

## Nurses/ Accord reached

*Continued from Page A1*

changes in the proposed health-benefit plan. The nurses had been demanding full health benefits for part-time nurses and were committed to the idea, since the majority of nurses at the hospital work part time. But Estess had said the health benefits were outside the hospital's financial reach.

They fell within reach Wednesday afternoon, thanks to an innovative compromise.

"The hospital's total health-benefit plan expended about \$1.4 million last year, and a good portion of that is paid to other health facilities," Estess said. "The new agreement involved a strong financial incentive to employees to have that work done here."

"That savings on the health plan was enough to add 2 percent to the wages," he said. "It's an elegant solution."

Estess said that if the plan works well, the cost to the hospital should not exceed the \$310,000 he had told the nurses was all the hospital could afford in annual increases.

But, he added, that's if all goes as hoped, and the hospital's nurses turn to their workplace for most of their health needs.

"It's an increase because we're talking about increasing the genuine wage vs. the theoretical savings on the health plan," Estess said.

When asked why the health plan solution hadn't been reached earlier, Estess said, "The change was sufficiently complex that it wasn't the kind of thing that could be worked out in the heat of battle across the bargaining table."

When news of the agreement was announced to strikers marching in front of the hospital, many embraced while others simply cheered and waved to passing cars.

"We said all along they want to be nurses, not strikers," Hatch said.

Estess, himself a registered nurse, had been working alongside other nurse-administrators throughout the week to keep the hospital at least partially staffed and operative.

"I'm sure all the administrative nurses would like to take a 36-hour nap," Estess said. "I know I would like to take a 36-hour nap."